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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study that examined the possibility that there is more than one category of only children. The study attempted to resolve inconsistencies in previous research outcomes with only children. The study involved data from female only children who were assessed longitudinally from early adolescence to late middle age on the 73-item California Q-sort of Personality Characteristics of only children. Factor analyses provided no evidence for a single homogeneous category. It was concluded that the only child category, although typically treated as homogeneous, is, in fact, heterogeneous. Three distinct types of female only children emerged: (1) normal, well-adjusted; (2) impulsive, acting out; and (3) first-bornish. It was shown that these types remain consistent over the life span from junior high school to late middle age. Each of the types is discussed in relation to previous research. A table showing results of the inverse factor analyses and a list of 23 references are appended. (GLR)

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The Only Child: Is There Only One Kind of Only?

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Introduction

Developmental psychologists have been interested in the only child for several decades, investigating qualities that distinguish the only child from other children, the socialization practices that contribute to such outcomes, the impact of one-childness on parents, and emotional problems that may occur. However, in the last decade there has been an added sense of urgency about acquiring such knowledge. Not only has the one-child family been mandated in the most populous country in the world, China (Ching, 1982), but one-child families will increase in the U. S. for the remainder of this century (Westoff, 1978).

Although the influence of siblings on one another's personality and cognitive development is attested to by well over 2,000 published studies (Dunn, 1983; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970; Wagner, Schubert & Schubert, 1980), fewer than 200 studies comprise the only child literature, many of them by-products of sibling studies. The literature depicts the only child as dysfunctional, characterized as self-centered, impulsive, and maladjusted (Blake, 1981; Rosenberg & Leino, 1987; Rosenberg & Falk, 1989). Popular views of the only child remain negative (Solomon, Clare, & Westoff, 1956). In empirical research, only children have been found to have fewer friends and to be less affiliative (Miller & Maruyama, 1976), and

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to be more likely to be diagnosed as psychologically maladjusted than others (Belmont, 1977). Thompson (1974) summarized the prevailing view of the only child as "generally maladjusted, self-centered, self-willed, attention-seeking, dependent on others, temperamental, anxious, generally unhappy and unlikeable, yet, somewhat more autonomous than a child with two siblings" (pp. 95-96). On the other hand, sibling presence is associated with more desirable personality and interpersonal characteristics (Falbo, 1982; Jiao, Ji, & Ching, 1986; Rosenberg & Falk, 1989; Rosenberg & Leino, 1987). Survey research indicates that 80 percent of white Americans think of the only child as disadvantaged (Blake, 1974). In general, public views and the scientific literature have tended to coincide in viewing the only child negaatively, handicapped by ;the absence of a sibling.

Despite the apparent uniformity in findings unfavorable to the only child,there are some inconsistencies in results (Falbo, 1984; Kammeyer, 1967). These findings have tended to emphasize the positive aspects of being an only child (Belmont & Marolla, 1973; Cla;udy, 1984; Falbo & Cooper, 1980). Falbo and Polit's (1986) meta-analysis of some 100 studies comparing onlies and non-onlies on intelligence, personality, sociability, achievement, and adjustment concluded that onlyies have more desirable personality traits (p. 181). Indeed, the reviewers concluded that only children were advantaged in the area of parent-child relations compared with children with siblings. Most striking, considering the literature of recent decades, they concluded that "with respect to achievement and intelligence, the results suggest that growing up without siblings is an advantage" (p. 182). In summary, their overall conclusions argued strongly that in intelligence, achievement, and character, only borns excelled beyond their peers with siblings (p. 185).

The need to resolve the inconsistencies in research and theory carries an added sense of urgency when cnsidering that China has mandated and effectively implemented a one-child family policy (Tao & Chiu, 1985), so that recent surveys in Nanjing and Shanghai reveal that 97 percent of all preschoolers are only children.

One possible resolutiion may be through recognizing that the category of only child is not homogeneous, but instead diverse. This study examined the possibility that there is more than one kind of only child. It involved data from only females assessed longitudinally from early adolescence (12 years) to late middle age (60 years) on a 73-item Q-sort (Block, 1961) of personality characteristics. The goal was to determine, using inverse factor analyses, whether there are multiple types of onlies or whether they are one homogeneous category.

The Study

Methods

Subjects. The data for female only children were selected from the archival data of the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley. We used the Intergenerational Sample (IGS), which originally represented the pooling of three longitudinal studies: the Guidance Study, the Berkeley Growth Study, and the Oakland Growth Study (for additional detail on the sample, see Eichorn, 1981). In the IGS studies, this combined sample was followed up in middle adulthood and again in late adulthood. For the present study, we selected data collected on the subjects when they were in junior high school (JHS, 11-14 years old), senior high school (SHS, 15-18 years old), in early adulthood (AD1), middle adulthood (AD2), and late

adulthood (AD3).

Measures. The measure used in the present study was the California Q-sort of Personality Characteristics (Block, 1961). Following detailed interviews lasting approximately 12 hours, the raters (most of whom were clinical psychologists with 10 o;r more years of clinical experience) sorted personality items such as "seeks reassurance from o;thers" to describe how characteristic they were of the individual. The rater sorted the items into a forced normal distribution with 9 categories, category 1 containing items least characteristics of the individual, and category 9 containing items most characteristic of the individual. The 73 items of the Q-sort and the method are discussed in more detail by Block (1961). Their validity and reliability have been demonstrated repeatedly (e.g., Conley, 1984; Eichorn, 1981).

Data Analysis. An inverse factor analysis (also known as Q technique or transposed factor analysis, Gorsuch, 1983) with promax rotation was used. Whereas in a standard factor analysis the goal is to determine which variables are highly correlated and cluster together, with an inverse factor analysis the goal is to see which individuals cluster together, forming a "type." And whereas with a standard factor analysis there should be a high ratio of the number of subjects to the number of variables, with an inverse factor analysis there should be a high ratio of number of variables to the number of subjects (Gorsuch, 1983). In the present study there are 73 variables and approximately 20 subjects at each age period, which is a satisfactory ratio.

Five separate inverse factor analyses were run, one at each of the five time periods. The scree test (Cattell, 1966) indicated that there were 3 types, a result that was consistent over all 5 analyses, and this solution was interpretable. Therefore, 3-factor or 3-type solutions are shown in all the

data analyses that are reported here.

Results.

The factor analysis provided no evidence for a single, homogeneous category. For example, for the junior high data, the first eigenvalue accounted for 35 percent of the variance, the second for 23 percent, and the third for 9 percent. In short, a single factor did not by itself capture the major portion of the variance.

The results of the inverse factor analyses for the subjects are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

As can be seen, in junior high school, the Type 1 subjects score high on personality characteristics such as talkative, arouses liking, poised, and productive, and low on characteristics such as thin-skinned, aloof, and fearful. We named this category of female onlies "normal, well-adjusted."

Type 2 individuals in junior high school scored high on characteristics such as self-indulgent, under-controlled, irritable, and brittle ego defenses, and low on dependable, overcontrolled, and satisfied with self. We named this category of female onlies "impulsive, acting out."

Finally, the Type 3 individuals scored high on characteristics such as dependable, protective,sympathetic, and feels guilty, and low on rebellious, self-indulgent, and self-dramatizing. Because their profile resembles that typically ascribed to firstborn children with siblings, we named this category of only females "first-bornish."

As Table 1 indicates, the 3-type factor solutions for the sample when

tested in senior high school, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and late middle adulthood with some slight variations shows a remarkable consistency in content.

Conclusions.

In an effort to resolve inconsistencies in previous research outcomes with the only child, it was posited that the only-child category, although typically treated as homogeneous is, in fact, heterogeneous or diverse. The results ofinverse factor analyses of Q-sort personality data on only female subjects over the life span provides evidence for such a notion.

Three distinct types of only females energed: (1) normal, well-adjusted; (2) ilmpulsive, acting-out; and (3) first-bornish. Furthermore, these types remain consistent over the life span from junior high school to late middle age.

In light of these results, it appears that treating the only child as a homogeneous category is questionable, and may well obscure as much as it reveals. Much of the inconsistency in previous research findings with the only child may be accounted for by sampling variations in regard to geography, time, culture, age, and other factors. That is, researchers may have sampled populations in which a preponderance of one type or another was present, yielding different outcomes across studies.

Some of tghe qualities characteristic of each type attenuate or are lost at later adult stages (AD2 and AD3). This is explicable if a status variable such as onliness has declining influence later in the life span of the individual.

The qualities associated with the three types of only child that emerged

in this study are highly interpretable. Traditionally, only children have been seen as self-centered, maladusted, lonely, and disadvantaged (Blake, 1974; Fenton, 1928; Rosenberg & Leino, 1987; Thompson, 1974), and so it comes as no surprise to find one type of only child that reflects the outcomes and and views of much prior literature.

Previous research, again, prepares us for the second emerging type, the first-bornish. Many previous studies of first-borns have yielded such qualities as dependable, protective, productive, feels guilty, and over-controlled (Hilton, 1967; Sampson, 1965; Schachter, 1959; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). After all, only children are first-borns and are exposed to many ofthe same contingencies as typical first-borns, although their experiences subsequently differ to some extent (i. e., other first-borns later have a sibling).

One of the less expected and more fascinating outcomesis the emergence of the well-adjusted, normal type of only child, although this finding is consistent with the views of Falbo and Polit (1986). Unmarked by some of the dysfunctional qualities of the acting-out, impulsive type, and less burdened by the over-controlled, guilt-prone qualities of first-bornish types,this third type suggests exciting research possibilities. What are the socialization practices antecedent to or associated with such a desirable adjustment? What are the parents like? Is the temperamental equanimity of this type biologically based? How do they perform intellectually? What are the dynamics of their escape from the vicissitudes of a non-sibling environment? In addition, knowing that only children more frequently live in single-parent homes (Falbo, 1982; Rosenberg & Falk, 1987), how do they escape the vicissitudes of the combined non-sibling, often single-parent

environment? These are only a few of a host of research questions their presence evokes.

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Table 1

Inverse Factor Analysis of Only Females on Q-sort, 5 Time Periods

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
JHS (N=18)	talkative	moody	dependeable
	arouse liking	thin-skinned	irritable
	expressive	seeks reassurance	protective
	gregarious	self-indulgent	sympathetic
	poised	under-controlled	productive
	assertive	irritable	feels guilty
	cheerful	basic hostility	somatizes
	conforms	brittle ego	values intell. matters
		extrapunitive	
	NORMAL-WELL ADJUSTED	IMPULSIVE-ACTING OUT	FIRSTBORNISH-DEPENDENT
SHS (N=17)	gregarious	self-dramatizing	overcontrolled
	talkative	self-indulgent	uncomfortable w. uncerta
	arouses liking	pushes limits	skeptical
	cheerful	thin-skinned	moralistic
	dependable	distrustful	condescending
	poised	extrapunitive	emotionally bland
	fastidious	undercontrolled	aloof
		irritable	
		brittle ego	
		rebellious	
Adult 1 (N=21)	poised	self-indulgent	gregarious
	productive	moody	dependable
	assertive	unpredictable	somatizes
	satisfied with self	somatizes	warm
	straightforward	bodily concerns	feels guilty
	power-oriented	self-defeating	wide interests
	conforms, conventional		arouses liking
Adult 2 (N=24)	straightforward	rapid tempo	aloof
	initiates humor	fastidious	feels guilty
	assertive	condescending	skeptical
	talkative	uncomfortable w. uncertainty	appears intelligent
	wide interests	productive	verbally fluent
	dependable	aloof	
Adult 3 (N=21)	productive	moody	submissive
	values independence	pushes limits	somatizes
	cheerful	rebellious	sympathetic
	power-oriented	talkative	uncomfort. w. uncertainty
	dependable	seeks reassurance	overcontrolled
	assertive	warm	bodily concerns
	rapid tempo	fastidious	aloof

JHS= Junior High School, SHS= Senior High School, Adult 1, 20 years, Adult 2, @ 40s, Adult 3, 52-60 years.